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ORGANIZING YOUR OUTLINE

One of the best ways to improve our writing is to follow the advice of the experts. Experienced writers tell us that the most important part of the whole writing process is the time spent in organizing the facts. That job requires the most time and patience. It makes your writing what it is--clear and concise or vague and verbose. It makes your writing hard-hitting or wishy-washy. Careful organization is mighty important in this crucial question of whether you "get through" to your readers.

Actually, there is nothing magical in good organization. It is simply the result of applying the same kind of intelligence and common sense to writing that a farmer uses in running his farm or that an engineer uses in planning a bridge.

You must lay a thoughtful foundation before you start to write. In this pre-writing stage, you're seeking the most clear-cut organization of your facts. This includes the "pitch" or approach to your subject. Naturally, you have your reader or audience clearly in mind when you're deciding on organization and outline. You need to tie in your publication with his interests--to relate it as closely to his experience as possible. Once you see the organization clearly, your reader will see it too.

This calls for a great deal of straight thinking and that's not easy. But it's required for a clearly organized publication. Clear thinking as to your outline starts a chain reaction. Clear thinking means a well-organized outline, which in turn means better understanding by your readers. You're "getting through" to them.

You wouldn't think of trying to build a house without plans--or do any research without a project outline--or conduct an extension program without a plan of work--or teach a class without a course outline. In everything we do we need to know where we're going and how to get there. In the same way, our outline helps us cover our subject matter in the most clear, concise way for our chosen audience.

Probably the time you spend with your feet up on the desk or just sitting and staring into space is the most valuable time you spend on your publication. That is, if you're thinking hard about choosing your audience, selecting your information and organizing your outline. This brain work gives you a sure foundation for a successful publication.

Actually, when you organize an outline, you PUT YOUR DUCKS IN A ROW. Or to put it another way, you "Put Your House in Order." (At this point use dime-store figures of ducks as visuals to emphasize the value of a well-organized outline. Do this ad lib.)

So in organizing a clear, concise outline, we're "Putting Our Ducks in A Row."

Right here, let me suggest three easy "tricks of the trade" that may prove helpful in making your outline. First, write in one sentence what you want your reader to learn. Second, write in one sentence what you want your reader to do. Third, write your title--the final title, if possible--for your article or booklet.

These three steps force you, the writer, to clarify and condense your most important points. They emphasize the high-lights of your information. They bring the whole picture sharply into focus and throw the emphasis where it belongs. They give "track" to your outline and writing. They keep it on the track. All this will carry over into the finished publication. It will be clearer and more forceful for following these three points (repeat them).

As to the mechanics of making an outline, in ^{general} there are three necessary steps to good organization. First, analyze the subject into paragraph ideas; second, choose the paragraph ideas to be developed; and third, arrange paragraph ideas in the most interesting and effective order.

Let's take a closer look at those pre-writing steps.

You can't do anything with a subject until you have taken it apart and considered each point by itself. In doing this, you naturally ask yourself

.....What do I want to say?

.....In what order do I want to say it?

.....How shall I make the important facts stand out?

.....How shall I interest the reader?

If you have a varied assortment of related topics, jot them all down. Never mind how helter-skelter or ragged the list of topics looks; order and smoothness will come later.

(At this point pick appropriate topic, like range management, irrigation and beef cattle (some specific aspect of such a subject), and list major topics in any order on blackboard. Do this thru audience discussion.)

The next step consists in looking through these main topics and choosing "the cream of the crop" for development. (Here, carry out this step with audience taking part to some extent. Don't let this take too much time. Also, make the point that some topics are important, others not so important, and that often-times some will duplicate or overlap others. Choose your topics wisely; don't be afraid to eliminate up to 50 percent of your material if you don't need it.)

Now, the third step is to arrange your topic or paragraph ideas in the strongest and clearest order. When you've finished this, you have a written outline--a great help in actual writing. (Rearrange topics, with audience help, into best order. End up with revised list as basis for outline.)

(Note: Noordhoff can use example of recommending infrared lamps for baby pigs to illustrate these three steps, but without audience taking part, if you'd rather do it that way).

More

Whatever system you use to organize your outline, the important thing is that you should end up with a logical outline. Your article or booklet should "hang together" as one unit. The sections making up the whole report should also stand out clearly to guide your reader.

Remember, the three steps discussed must all be taken before we begin to write. After we have analyzed the subject, chosen the best topic ideas, and arranged them in proper order, we are then ready to begin to write--AND NOT UNTIL THEN.

Of course, the acid test of good organization is in the writing itself. Failure to plan properly will show up in these faults:

First, and easiest to see, many paragraphs include statements that do not bear directly on the subject. The writer needs to cut out the "fat."

Second, paragraphs fail to develop one central idea. There's a certain digression of "wandering about." Paragraphs are watered down instead of hard-hitting.

Third, the writer fails to select and maintain a logical point of view. We've probably all seen reports and articles where the author is inconsistent and contradictory and qualifies earlier overenthusiastic statements.

One other point: Following the rules of organization is not enough. Do just this alone and you'll have a good report, but it will be common, ordinary reading--rather dull--no zip or life to it. You also must show interest in your writing. Add the spark of enthusiasm and you'll have a lively article that compels readers to stay with you to the last word. A good article or report is the result of a lot of hard work--and enthusiasm.

(Ad lib summary, emphasizing Put Your Ducks in A Row.)



